

PCTWORLD INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY ORGANIZATION
International Bureau

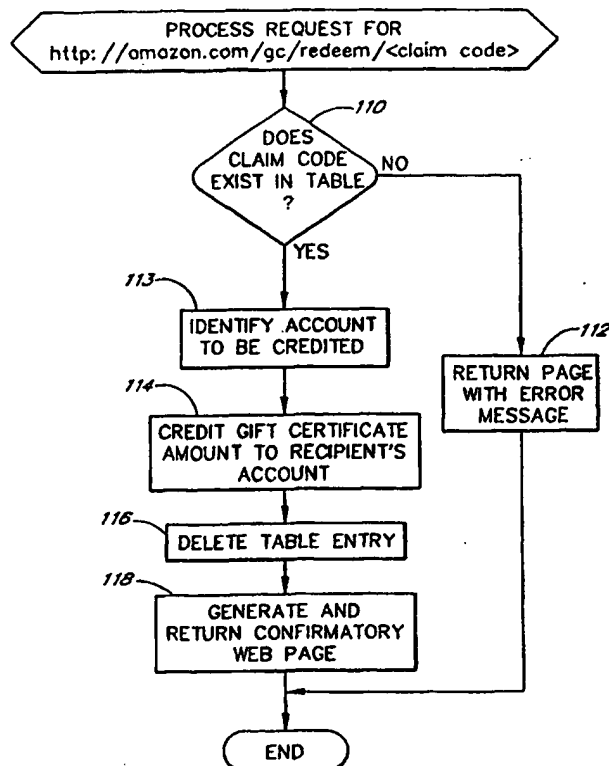
INTERNATIONAL APPLICATION PUBLISHED UNDER THE PATENT COOPERATION TREATY (PCT)

(51) International Patent Classification ⁶ : G06F 17/60		A1	(11) International Publication Number: WO 00/16227
			(43) International Publication Date: 23 March 2000 (23.03.00)
(21) International Application Number: PCT/US99/20695 (22) International Filing Date: 9 September 1999 (09.09.99) (30) Priority Data: 09/153,632 15 September 1998 (15.09.98) US (71) Applicant: AMAZON.COM [US/US]; Suite 1200, 1200 12th Avenue South, Seattle, WA 98144 (US). (72) Inventor: VAN DUSEN, Karen, L.; 14026 227th Avenue, N.E., Woodinville, WA 98072 (US). (74) Agent: ALTMAN, Daniel, E.; Knobbe, Martens, Olson & Bear, LLP, Sixteenth Floor, 620 Newport Center Drive, Newport Beach, CA 92660 (US).			(81) Designated States: AE, AL, AM, AT, AT (Utility model), AU, AZ, BA, BB, BG, BR, BY, CA, CH, CN, CR, CU, CZ, CZ (Utility model), DE, DE (Utility model), DK, DK (Utility model), DM, EE, EE (Utility model), ES, FI, FI (Utility model), GB, GD, GE, GH, GM, HR, HU, ID, IL, IN, IS, JP, KE, KG, KP, KR, KZ, LC, LK, LR, LS, LT, LU, LV, MD, MG, MK, MN, MW, MX, NO, NZ, PL, PT, RO, RU, SD, SE, SG, SI, SK, SK (Utility model), SL, TJ, TM, TR, TT, UA, UG, UZ, VN, YU, ZA, ZW, ARIPO patent (GH, GM, KE, LS, MW, SD, SL, SZ, UG, ZW), Eurasian patent (AM, AZ, BY, KG, KZ, MD, RU, TJ, TM), European patent (AT, BE, CH, CY, DE, DK, ES, FI, FR, GB, GR, IE, IT, LU, MC, NL, PT, SE), OAPI patent (BF, BJ, CF, CG, CI, CM, GA, GN, GW, ML, MR, NE, SN, TD, TG). Published With international search report.

(54) Title: ELECTRONIC GIFT CERTIFICATE SYSTEM

(57) Abstract

An electronic gift certificate system is disclosed which distributes electronic gift certificates in the form of e-mail documents that include hyperlinks for automating the redemption process. When a gift certificate recipient selects such a hyperlink, the recipient's computer automatically transmits a claim code (step 110) to the merchant's Web site, and the site responds by automatically crediting the recipient's personal account (step 114) with the gift certificate amount. When the recipient subsequently makes a purchase for the merchant's Web site, the recipient's account balance is automatically applied to the purchase price.



FOR THE PURPOSES OF INFORMATION ONLY

Codes used to identify States party to the PCT on the front pages of pamphlets publishing international applications under the PCT.

AL	Albania	ES	Spain	LS	Lesotho	SI	Slovenia
AM	Armenia	FI	Finland	LT	Lithuania	SK	Slovakia
AT	Austria	FR	France	LU	Luxembourg	SN	Senegal
AU	Australia	GA	Gabon	LV	Latvia	SZ	Swaziland
AZ	Azerbaijan	GB	United Kingdom	MC	Monaco	TD	Chad
BA	Bosnia and Herzegovina	GE	Georgia	MD	Republic of Moldova	TG	Togo
BB	Barbados	GH	Ghana	MG	Madagascar	TJ	Tajikistan
BE	Belgium	GN	Guinea	MK	The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia	TM	Turkmenistan
BF	Burkina Faso	GR	Greece			TR	Turkey
BG	Bulgaria	HU	Hungary	ML	Mali	TT	Trinidad and Tobago
BJ	Benin	IE	Ireland	MN	Mongolia	UA	Ukraine
BR	Brazil	IL	Israel	MR	Mauritania	UG	Uganda
BY	Belarus	IS	Iceland	MW	Malawi	US	United States of America
CA	Canada	IT	Italy	MX	Mexico	UZ	Uzbekistan
CF	Central African Republic	JP	Japan	NE	Niger	VN	Viet Nam
CG	Congo	KE	Kenya	NL	Netherlands	YU	Yugoslavia
CH	Switzerland	KG	Kyrgyzstan	NO	Norway	ZW	Zimbabwe
CI	Côte d'Ivoire	KP	Democratic People's Republic of Korea	NZ	New Zealand		
CM	Cameroon	KR	Republic of Korea	PL	Poland		
CN	China	KZ	Kazakhstan	PT	Portugal		
CU	Cuba	LC	Saint Lucia	RO	Romania		
CZ	Czech Republic	LJ	Liechtenstein	RU	Russian Federation		
DE	Germany	LK	Sri Lanka	SD	Sudan		
DK	Denmark	LR	Liberia	SE	Sweden		
EE	Estonia			SG	Singapore		

ELECTRONIC GIFT CERTIFICATE SYSTEM

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates to electronic commerce, and more specifically, relates to methods for purchasing, distributing and redeeming electronic gift certificates.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

5 In the field of Internet commerce, it is common for Web sites of online merchants to include functionality for allowing users to purchase and redeem electronic gift certificates. To purchase a gift certificate using such a system, the purchaser commonly uses a standard Web browser to retrieve, fill out, and submit a gift certificate order form (typically consisting of one
10 or more form pages). The information requested by the order form typically includes at least the name of the purchaser, the name and e-mail address of the intended recipient, and the monetary amount of the gift certificate.

In response to the submission of the gift certificate order, the Web site automatically generates and sends an e-mail to the recipient. This e-mail commonly includes the name of
15 the purchaser, the amount of the gift certificate, a gift certificate claim code, and instructions for redeeming the gift certificate. To redeem the gift certificate, the recipient is typically required to initially access the merchant's Web site and select one or more items for purchase. The user may additionally or alternatively be required to navigate to a special redemption area. Upon proceeding to a "check-out" area of the site, the user is then provided the opportunity to
20 type in and submit the gift certificate claim code.

This method of distributing and redeeming electronic gift certificates has several problems. One problem is that the recipient is required to manually enter the claim code. In addition to being an inconvenience to the recipient, the user may forget to enter the claim code during the check-out process and thus fail to receive the benefit of the gift certificate. Further,
25 if the recipient makes an error while typing in the claim code, the recipient may be inconvenienced with having to reenter the claim code, or may even be given credit for another user's gift certificate.

Another problem is that the recipient is required to either use the gift certificate immediately or else preserve the claim code for subsequent use. If the claim code is lost prior
30 to use, it may be difficult or impossible for the recipient to redeem the gift certificate.

The present invention seeks to provide a more efficient and reliable system for distributing and redeeming electronic gift certificates.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention provides an electronic gift certificate system which improves the efficiency and reliability of the redemption process. In accordance with the invention, the system distributes electronic gift certificates in the form of e-mail documents that include
5 hyperlinks for automating the redemption process. When a gift certificate recipient clicks on such a hyperlink, the recipient's computer automatically transmits a claim code or other identification information to the merchant's Web site, and the site responds by automatically crediting the recipient's personal account with the gift certificate amount. When the recipient subsequently makes a purchase from the merchant's Web site, the recipient's account balance
10 is automatically applied to the purchase price.

An important benefit of this process is that it eliminates the need for the recipient to manually enter the claim code. Thus, the redemption process is simpler and more efficient for the gift certificate recipient. In addition, there is little or no risk that the user will submit an erroneous claim code.

15 Another important benefit is that the recipient need not retain the gift certificate code until the time of purchase. For example, upon receiving the electronic gift certificate, the recipient can immediately click on the link to credit his or her account, but then postpone making a purchase until a later date. The likelihood that the claim code will be lost before the user makes a purchase is thus significantly reduced. In addition, there is no need for the user
20 to remember to enter a claim code or take any other special action during the check-out process.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

These and other features of the invention will now be described with reference to the drawings summarized below. These drawings and the associated description are provided to
25 illustrate a preferred embodiment of the invention, and not to limit the scope of the invention.

Figure 1 illustrates an example Web site form page for allowing users to order gift certificates.

Figure 2 illustrates an example gift certificate e-mail with a hyperlink for automating the redemption process.

30 Figure 3 illustrates an example Web page that is displayed to the gift certificate recipient in response to selection of the hyperlink in Figure 2.

Figure 4 illustrates a preferred set of Web site components for implementing a gift certificate system in accordance with the invention, and illustrates typical user components for accessing the system.

Figure 5 illustrates a sequence of steps that are performed by the gift certificate application of Figure 4 in response to submission of a gift certificate order.

Figure 6 illustrates an automated redemption process that is implemented by the gift certificate application.

5

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

Throughout the following description, the term "Web site" is used to refer to a user-accessible network site that implements the basic World Wide Web standards for the coding and transmission of hypertextual documents. These standards currently include HTML (the Hypertext Markup Language) and HTTP (the Hypertext Transfer Protocol). It should be understood that the term "site" is not intended to imply a single geographic location, as a Web or other network site can, for example, include multiple geographically-distributed computer systems that are appropriately linked together.

The present invention provides an electronic gift certificate system which improves the efficiency and reliability of the redemption process. In accordance with the invention, the system distributes electronic gift certificates in the form of e-mail documents that include hyperlinks for automating the redemption process. When a gift certificate recipient clicks on such a hyperlink, the recipient's computer automatically transmits a claim code to the merchant's Web site, and the site responds by automatically crediting the recipient's personal account with the gift certificate amount. When the recipient subsequently makes a purchase from the merchant's Web site, the recipient's account balance is automatically applied to the purchase price.

An important benefit of this process is that it eliminates the need for the recipient to manually enter the claim code. Thus, the redemption process is simpler and more efficient for the gift certificate recipient. In addition, there is little or no risk that the user will submit an erroneous claim code.

Another important benefit is that the recipient need not retain the gift certificate code until the time of purchase. For example, upon receiving the electronic gift certificate, the recipient can immediately click on the link to credit his or her account, but then postpone making a purchase until a later date. The likelihood that the claim code will be lost prior to use is thus significantly reduced. In addition, there is no need for the user to remember to enter a claim code or take any other special action during the check-out process.

A preferred implementation of the gift certificate system will now be described with reference to Figures 1-6. Throughout the following description, reference will be made to various implementation-specific details, including, for example, coding conventions.

document and protocol standards, and forms used for purchasing and redeeming electronic gift certificates. These details are provided in order to fully set forth a preferred embodiment of the invention, and not to limit the scope of the invention. The scope of the invention is set forth in the appended claims.

5 For purposes of illustration, the merchant Web site in the disclosed implementation is the Web site of Amazon.com. As is well known in the field of Internet commerce, the Amazon.com site includes functionality for allowing users to browse and make online purchases from a catalog of over 2.5 million book titles. As described below, the site includes an accounts database which stores information (names, e-mail addresses, billing information,
10 etc.) about users that have previously made purchases from the site. In other embodiments, the items available for purchase from the Web site may, for example, include downloadable items such as software programs and digital publications.

Figure 1 illustrates an example gift certificate order form page that can be used to place an order for an electronic gift certificate. Users may be provided the option of retrieving
15 this page, for example, by selecting a "gift certificates" link from the Amazon.com site. As depicted by Figure 1, the form includes fields for specifying the following information: the respective names of the purchaser and the recipient (item 1), an optional message to the recipient (item 2), a gift certificate amount (item 3), the distribution method (item 4), and the e-mail address and account information of the purchaser (item 5).

20 The order form page may also include fields (not shown) for allowing the purchaser to specifying the recipient using something other than an e-mail address, such as the recipient's name, address and or telephone number. The Web site 50 would then use this information to look up the recipient's e-mail address, such as from an accounts database.

After the purchaser fills out and submits this form page, the purchaser is presented
25 with one or more additional pages (not shown) for completing the order. For example, the user is presented with a page that asks the user to specify a credit card number or other billing information for paying for the gift certificate. Once the order has been placed and paid for, the Web site sends a gift certificate e-mail (Figure 2) to the recipient and sends an order confirmation e-mail to the purchaser.

30 Figure 2 illustrates the general form of the gift certificate e-mail document ("e-mail") that is sent to the recipient. In this example, it is assumed that the recipient is a registered user of the Amazon.com Web site. As depicted by Figure 2, the e-mail includes a hyperlink 30 for allowing the recipient to automatically redeem the gift certificate, and includes an associated description 32 of the automated redemption process. The hyperlink 30 is displayed to the user

as highlighted text, but may alternatively be displayed, for example, as an icon or other graphical image.

The URL (Uniform Resource Locator) associated with the hyperlink 30 preferably includes a gift certificate claim code that uniquely identifies the gift certificate. For example,
5 the URL may be in the form of

<http://amazon.com/gc/redeem/A1234567>,

where A1234567 is the claim code. The recipient can select the hyperlink 30 using any
10 technique that is supported by the recipient's computer, including, for example, clicking on the link with a mouse, touching the link on a touch-sensitive display, or using a voice command. When the recipient selects this hyperlink 30, the claim code is conveyed to the Web site (as part of a standard HTTP GET <URL> message) and is used by the site to automatically identify and credit the recipient's personal account. An example redemption
15 confirmation page that is displayed to the recipient upon selecting the hyperlink 30 is shown in Figure 3 and discussed below.

With further reference to Figure 2, the e-mail also preferably includes a set of instructions 34 for redeeming the gift certificate using the conventional method. This method involves accessing the Web site, selecting one or more items to be purchased, proceeding to
20 check-out, and then entering the claim code. This redemption method may be useful, for example, if the recipient's e-mail application does not support the use of hyperlinks. In other implementations, the manual redemption instructions 34 may be omitted.

Figure 3 illustrates an example Web page that may be displayed to the recipient in response to selection of the hyperlink 30. The Web page includes a message 40 indicating
25 that the gift certificate amount has been successfully deposited into the recipient's account. In other implementations, this page may be preceded, for example, by a page which asks the recipient to confirm that the gift certificate amount should be deposited into the recipient's account.

If the recipient has multiple accounts under the same e-mail address, the recipient may
30 initially be presented with a page which asks the user to select the account to be credited. Alternatively, the gift certificate e-mail (Figure 2) may be provided with separate hyperlinks 30 for each such account, so that the recipient can both select and credit one of the multiple accounts with a single action (such as a single mouse click). For example, a user that has three accounts under the same e-mail address may receive a gift certificate e-mail that has three

hyperlinks (one per account), with each link being presented together with associated account identification information (shipping address, partial credit card number, etc.) that allows the user to identify each account.

From the redemption confirmation page of Figure 3, the recipient can enter a query for searching the Amazon.com catalog, select a subject to browse, or access other areas of the Amazon.com site. Because the gift certificate amount is maintained in the recipient's account until used, there is no need for the recipient to place an order or even browse the site at this point. In addition, there is no need for the recipient to retain either the gift certificate e-mail or the claim code.

As indicated above, the example set forth in Figures 1-3 assumes that the recipient is already registered (i.e., already has an account) with Amazon.com. When the recipient does not have an account, the hyperlink 30 (Figure 2) and associated description 32 are preferably replaced with a hyperlink (not shown) to an account setup form (not shown). When the user completes and submits the account setup form, the gift certificates application 72 creates the new account and automatically credits the account with the gift certificate amount. Various alternatives to this method are possible. For example, in one embodiment, the purchaser is prompted (via a form page) at the time of purchase for additional information about the unknown user (recipient), and this information is used to set up an account for the recipient.

Figure 4 illustrates the basic hardware and software components that are typically invoked during the above-described process. As depicted by this drawing, the purchaser and the recipient access the Web site 50 using respective PCs 52, 54 or other general purpose computers that have access to the Internet. The purchaser and/or recipient may alternatively access the Web site 50 using special purpose devices. The purchaser and recipient computers 52, 54 run commercially-available Web browser applications 62, 64 such as Microsoft Internet Explorer™ or Netscape Navigator™, which implement the basic World Wide Web standards such as HTTP and HTML. The recipient's computer 52 also runs a commercially available e-mail application 66, such as Microsoft Outlook™ or Netscape Navigator, which supports the use of hyperlinks. The e-mail application 66 and the browser 64 may be integrated with one another, and/or may be integrated with other application programs or the operating system.

In the embodiment described herein, the Web site 50 comprises a computer system and associated content that are accessible via the Internet. The Web site 50 may optionally include content which spans multiple Internet domains, and/or may be implemented using physical servers that are geographically remote from one another. In other embodiments, the

Web site 50 may be in the form of an intranet site, in which case the computers 52, 54 may be coupled to the site solely by a private network. For example, Web site 50 may be in the form of an internal corporate gift store site for company employees.

5 In other embodiments, the Web site 50 may be replaced with another type of network site. For example, the various gift certificate services described herein could alternatively be implemented on a hypertextual site or browsing area of an online services network such as America Online or MSN, in which case users may access the site using software that implements non-standard document formats and transfer protocols.

10 As further depicted by Figure 4, the Web site 50 includes a commercially-available Web server application 70. The Web server application 70 accesses an HTML database 76 that is used to generate Web pages in response to the actions of end users. A products database (not shown) and various back-end components (not shown) are also used for this purpose.

15 The Web site 50 also includes a gift certificates application 72 (hereinafter "GC application") which includes the basic functionality for processing gift certificate orders and redemption requests. The GC application 72 accesses a user accounts database 78 that includes information about users that have registered (such as by placing an order) with the Web site 50. This information typically includes, for example, the names, e-mail addresses, user IDs, account passwords, shipping addresses, and credit card numbers of such users. The
20 accounts database also stores monetary account balances for users.

As depicted by Figure 4, the GC application 72 preferably maintains a look-up table 80 of all outstanding gift certificates (i.e., all unexpired gift certificates that have not yet been redeemed). In the embodiment shown, each entry in the table 80 includes the following: the
25 unique claim code, the names and e-mail addresses of the purchaser and recipient, the gift certificate amount, and the expiration date. Some or all of this information may alternatively be stored solely within the user accounts database 78.

Figure 5 illustrates a sequence of steps that are performed by the GC application 72 to process an order for an e-mail-based gift certificate. This process is executed after the purchaser's credit card number or other payment information has been verified. As depicted
30 by steps 90 and 92, the GC application 72 initially generates a claim code that uniquely identifies the gift certificate, and then stores the claim code and the associated gift certificate information in the table 80. Various alternatives to using a claim code and a look-up table are possible. For example, the claim code could be replaced with an encrypted user ID of the recipient and an encrypted code which represents the gift certificate amount.

The claim codes are preferably selected at random from a relatively large set of possible values (e.g., 10^{12} possible values). The outstanding (valid) claim codes thus represent a sparse subset of the universe of possible claim code values. This technique provides a level of security by reducing the likelihood that unauthorized users will be able to identify valid claim codes through trial and error. This technique could additionally or alternatively be applied to other portions of the URL. An example of a method that can be used to generate the claim codes to provide a desired level of security is described in a concurrently-filed provisional patent application titled SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR PROVIDING SECURE ACCESS TO PRIVATE WEB PAGES.

10 The application 72 also generates an e-mail document to send to the recipient (step 94). The content of the e-mail document is preferably in an HTML format, although other markup languages that support hyperlinks could be used. The e-mail document is initially in the general form shown in Figure 2, but does not include the hyperlink 30 and associated description 32 for automatically redeeming the gift certificate.

15 The GC application 72 then accesses the user accounts database 78 (Figure 4) to determine whether the recipient has an Amazon.com account (step 98). If the recipient has an account, the automatic redemption hyperlink 30 and associated description 32 are generated and inserted within the e-mail document (step 100). The hyperlink 30 includes the appropriate URL for automatically redeeming the gift certificate. The URL may, for example, be in the
20 format `http://amazon.com/gc/redeem/<claim code>`, and is preferably embedded within the document in the HTML "GET URL" format. In the embodiment described herein, this claim code is the same as the claim code used for manual redemption.

 If the recipient does not have an account, a hyperlink to an account setup page is inserted within the e-mail document (step 101) in place of the redemption hyperlink 30. As
25 described above, using this link to set up an account causes the gift certificate to be automatically redeemed.

 To accommodate recipients that have multiple accounts under the same e-mail address, the GC application 72 may optionally be configured to generate a separate hyperlink 30 for each such account. As described above, this would allow the recipient to select and
30 credit an account with a single mouse click or other action. To implement this feature, an account identifier may, for example, be appended to each URL. In addition, each hyperlink may be displayed in the e-mail together with a respective account identifier, such as a shipping address, password, or partial credit card number that is unique to that account.

An alternative method for handling a recipient with multiple accounts is to prompt the recipient for the password of the account to be credited. This may be accomplished, for example, by including a password field (not shown) in the gift certificate e-mail. When the user selects the automatic redemption hyperlink 30, the password would be transmitted to the Web site 50 and used to select the account.

With further reference to Figure 5, the gift certificate e-mail document is then closed and sent to the recipient (step 102). In addition, an order confirmation e-mail is generated and sent to the purchaser (step 104).

Figure 6 illustrates a sequence of steps that are performed by the GC application 72 when the Web site 50 receives a request for a URL in the format indicated above. The GC application 72 initially searches the look-up table 80 for an entry having a matching claim code (step 110). If no matching entry is found, a page is generated and returned with an appropriate error message (step 112). The error message may, for example, inform the user that the gift certificate code is invalid and instruct the user to contact customer service if the problem persists.

If the claim code is found in the table 80, the GC application 72 identifies the account to be credited (step 113). If the recipient has only one account, this account is identified from the information in the table 80. If the recipient has multiple accounts, the specific account is identified using information supplied by the recipient. As described above, this additional information may be obtained, for example, by asking the recipient to select a link which corresponds to the account, or by prompting the recipient to type in an account password. Once the account has been identified, the GC application 72 automatically credits the recipient's account with the gift certificate amount (step 114). As indicated above, the recipient may alternatively be prompted to confirm that his or her account should be credited.

Once the recipient's account has been credited, the GC application 72 deletes the corresponding entry from the table 80 (step 116). The GC application 72 may also include a separate process that periodically deletes entries that have expired. The GC application also sends a confirmatory Web page (Figure 3) to the recipient's computer 54.

Although this invention has been described in terms of certain preferred embodiments, other embodiments that are apparent to those of ordinary skill in the art are also within the scope of this invention. Accordingly, the scope of the present invention is intended to be defined only by reference to the appended claims.

WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1. A method for facilitating the redemption of electronic gift certificates, the method comprising the steps of:

5 providing a downloadable gift certificate order form on a network site, the order form including fields for specifying at least a monetary amount of a gift certificate and a gift certificate recipient; and

10 responding to an electronic submission of the gift certificate order form by a user by generating an e-mail document and transmitting the document to the recipient, the e-mail document including a hyperlink which is selectable by the recipient to automatically redeem the gift certificate, the hyperlink configured such that selection by the recipient causes information sufficient to identify at least the recipient and the monetary amount to be transmitted to the network site.

2. The method of Claim 1, further comprising the step of responding to selection of the hyperlink by crediting the monetary amount of the gift certificate to a personal account of the recipient without requiring the recipient to make a purchase.

3. The method of Claim 2, wherein the step of responding to submission of the order form comprises identifying a plurality of accounts of the recipient, and prompting the recipient in the e-mail document to specify the account to be credited from the plurality of accounts.

20 4. The method of Claim 3, wherein the step of prompting the recipient includes at least one of (a) inserting a plurality of hyperlinks within the e-mail, each hyperlink corresponding to a respective account, and (b) prompting the recipient for an account password.

5. The method of Claim 1, wherein the step of responding to the submission of the gift certificate order form further comprises determining whether the recipient is a registered user of the network site.

6. The method of Claim 5, further comprising the step of sending an alternative e-mail document to the recipient if the recipient is not a registered user of the network site, the alternative e-mail document including a hyperlink to an account setup page.

30 7. The method of Claim 1, wherein the step of responding to the electronic submission of the gift certificate order form is performed by executable code which runs on a Web site.

8. The method of Claim 1, wherein the e-mail document has first and second hyperlinks which correspond, respectively, to first and second accounts of the recipient.

wherein selection of the first hyperlink causes the first account to be credited and selection of the second hyperlink causes the second account to be credited.

9. A method for facilitating the redemption of electronic gift certificates, the method comprising the steps of:

5 providing a downloadable gift certificate order form on a Web site, the order form including fields for specifying at least a gift certificate recipient and a monetary amount of a gift certificate;

responding to an electronic submission of the gift certificate order form by a user by generating an e-mail document and transmitting the document to the recipient, the e-mail document including a hyperlink which is selectable by the recipient to automatically redeem the gift certificate, the hyperlink configured such that selection by the recipient causes information sufficient to identify at least the recipient and the monetary amount to be transmitted to the Web site;

10 responding to selection of the hyperlink by crediting the monetary amount of the gift certificate to a personal account of the recipient; and

15 automatically applying a balance in the personal account to a subsequent purchase made by the recipient.

10. The method of Claim 9, wherein the e-mail document has first and second hyperlinks which correspond, respectively, to first and second accounts of the recipient, wherein selection of the first hyperlink causes the first account to be credited and selection of the second hyperlink causes the second account to be credited.

11. A network site which provides functionality for purchasing and redeeming electronic gift certificates over a computer network, the site comprising:

25 an accounts database that includes accounts of users of the network site, the accounts database storing account balances for at least some of the users, the account balances applicable to items that are available for purchase from the network site;

a downloadable gift certificate order form, the order form including fields for specifying at least a monetary amount of a gift certificate and a gift certificate recipient;

30 an executable order processing module which is responsive to an electronic submission of the gift certificate order form by a user by generating an e-mail document and transmitting the document to the recipient, the e-mail document including a hyperlink which is selectable by the recipient to automatically redeem the gift certificate, the hyperlink configured such that selection by the recipient causes

information sufficient to identify at least the recipient and the monetary amount to be transmitted to the network site; and

an executable redemption module which is responsive to selection of the hyperlink by crediting the monetary amount of the gift certificate to a personal account of the recipient.

12. The network site of Claim 11, wherein the order processing module responds to the submission of the gift certificate order form by accessing the accounts database to determine whether the recipient has an account therein.

13. The network site of Claim 12, wherein the order processing module omits said hyperlink from the e-mail document if the recipient does not have an account.

14. The network site of Claim 11, wherein the gift certificate order form, the order processing module and the redemption module are accessible on the network site using a standard World Wide Web protocol.

15. The network site of Claim 11, wherein the hyperlink includes a uniform resource locator (URL), the URL including at least an address of the network site and a gift certificate claim code.

16. A method of redeeming an electronic gift certificate issued by an online merchant, the electronic gift certificate comprising an e-mail document which includes a hyperlink therein, the hyperlink adapted to be used to automatically redeem the gift certificate without the need to enter a claim code, the method comprising the steps of:

viewing the e-mail document with an e-mail application that supports the use of hyperlinks, the e-mail application running on a computer that is connected to a network; and

during said step of viewing, selecting the hyperlink to initiate a transfer of information over the network to a network site of the online merchant, the information being sufficient for the online merchant to identify at least a monetary amount of the gift certificate and an identity of a gift certificate recipient.

17. The method of Claim 16, wherein the step of selecting causes an account of the recipient to be credited with the monetary amount.

18. The method of Claim 17, wherein the network site is a Web site, and the method further comprises accessing the Web site with a browser program to purchase an item from the online merchant using the gift certificate amount credited to the account.

2/6

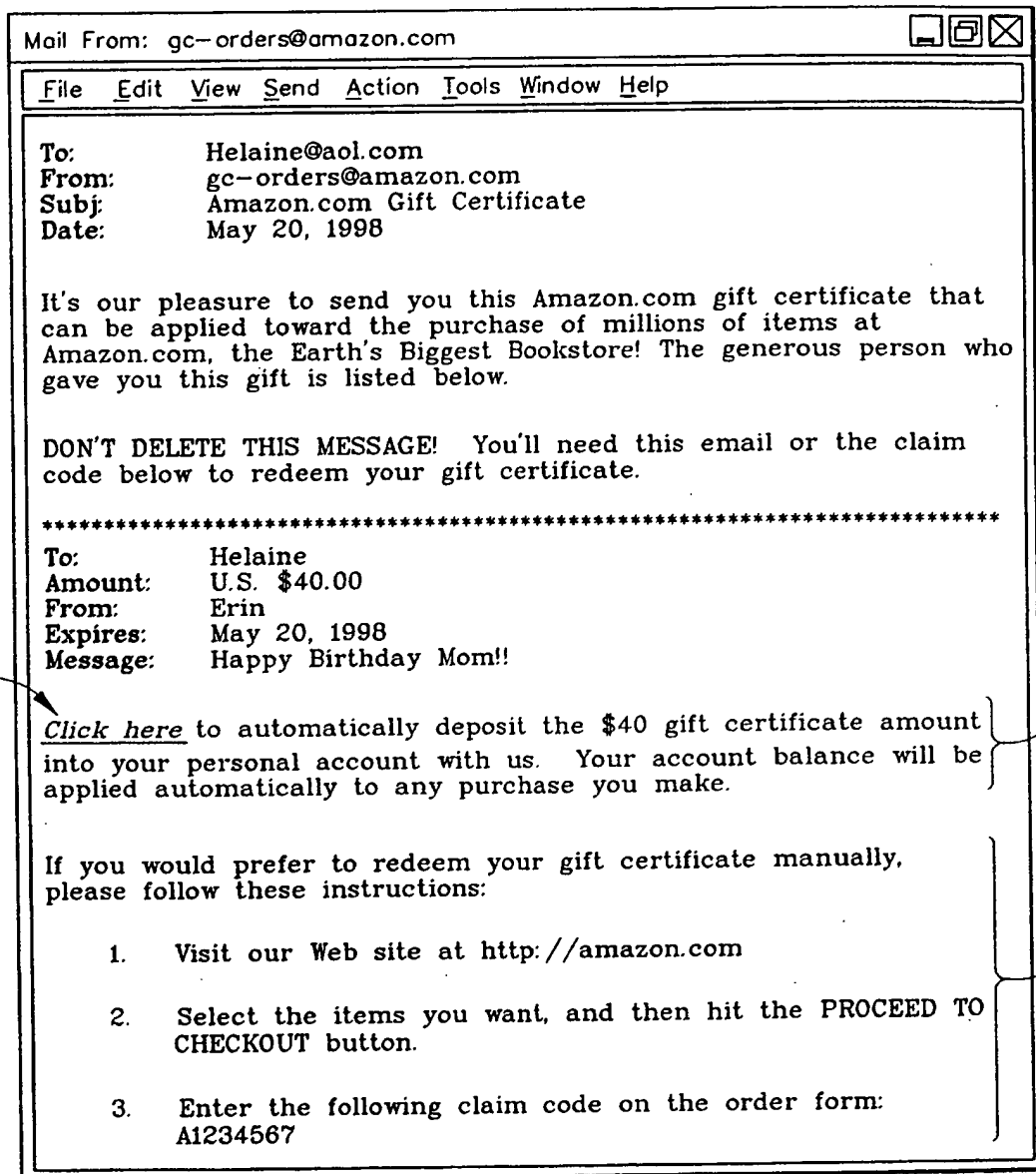


FIG. 2

3/6

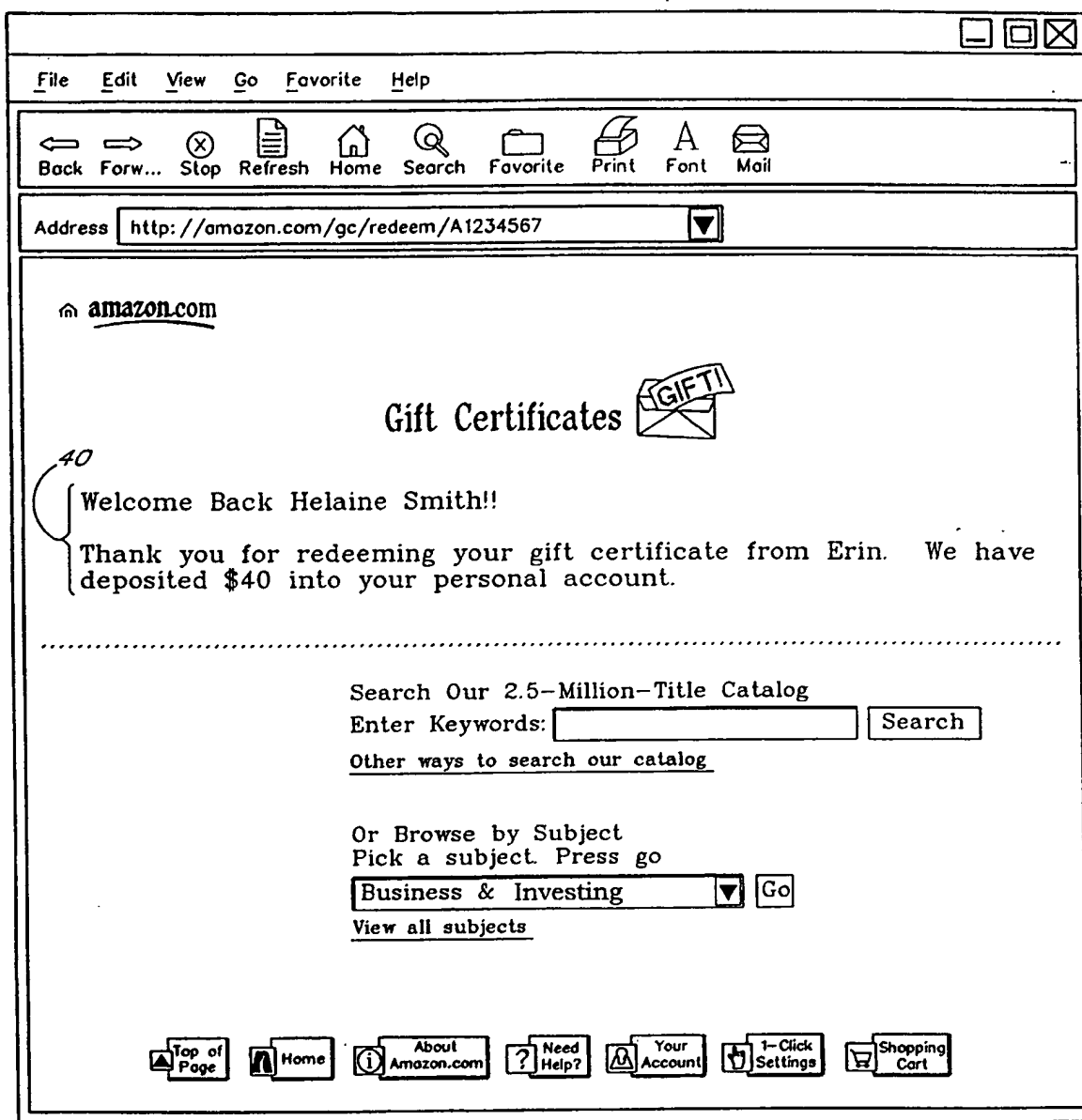


FIG. 3

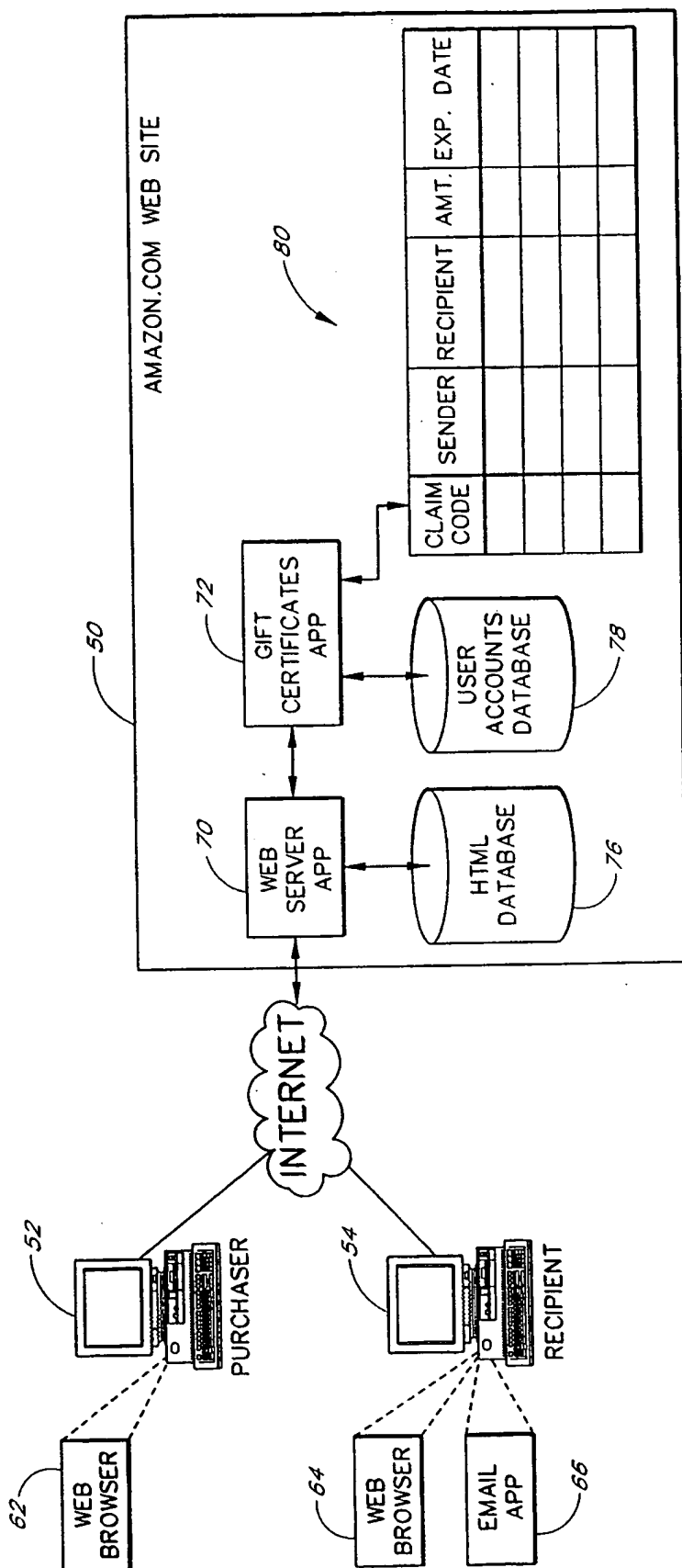


FIG. 4

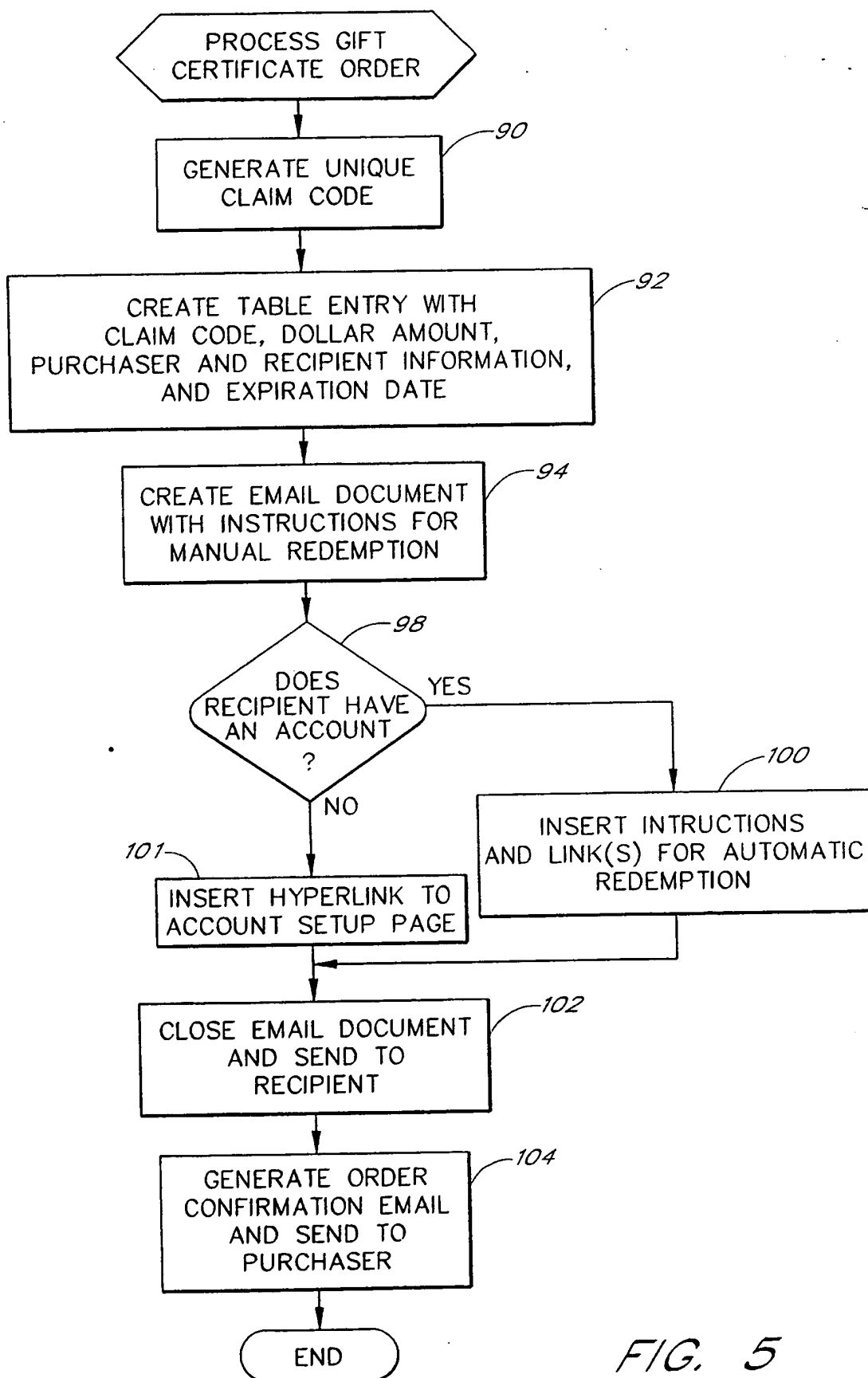


FIG. 5

6/6

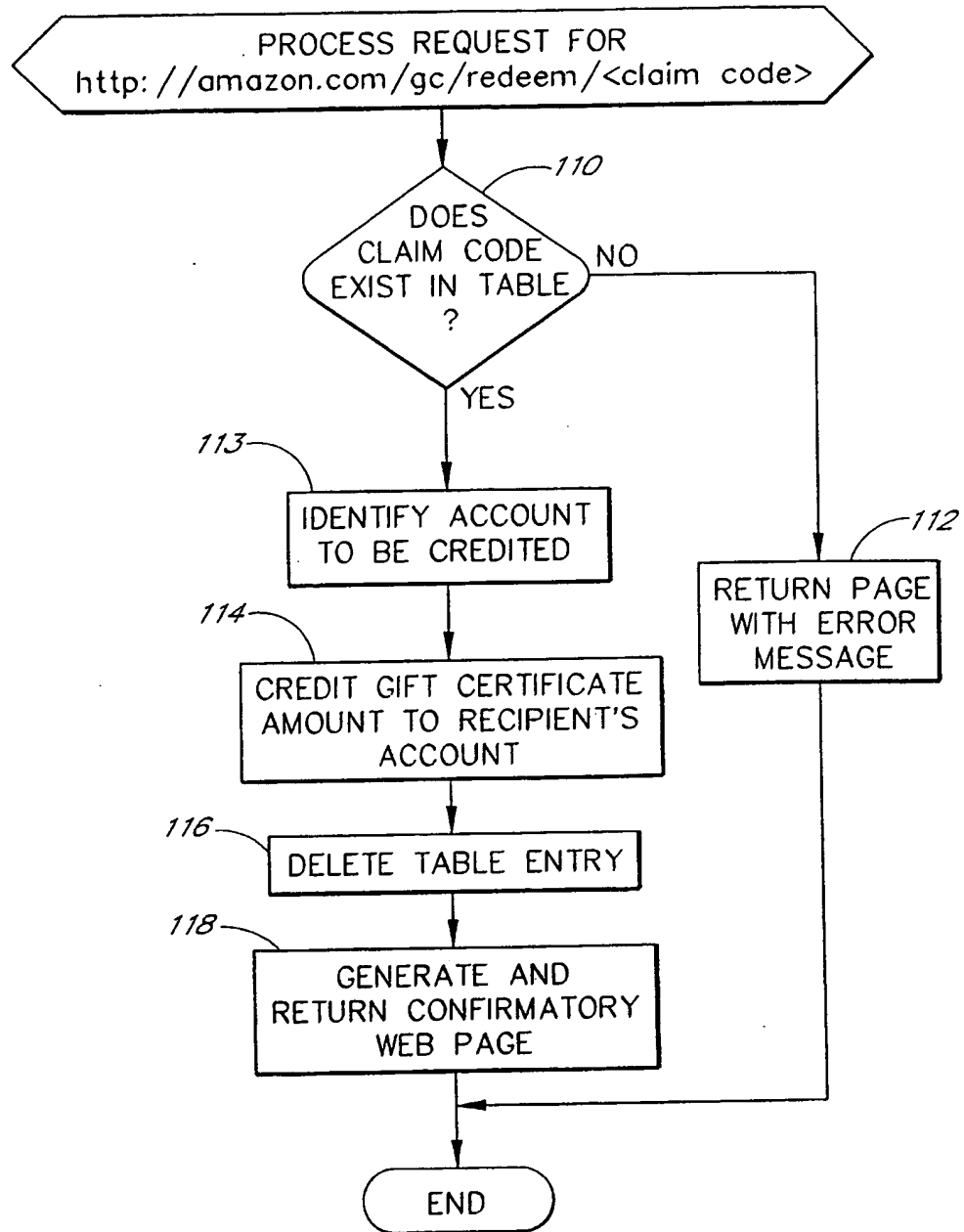
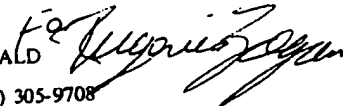


FIG. 6

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No.
PCT/US99/20695

A. CLASSIFICATION OF SUBJECT MATTER IPC(6) : G06F 17/60 US CL : 705/26, 14 According to International Patent Classification (IPC) or to both national classification and IPC		
B. FIELDS SEARCHED Minimum documentation searched (classification system followed by classification symbols) U.S. : 705/26, 14; 707/501, 513 Documentation searched other than minimum documentation to the extent that such documents are included in the fields searched Electronic data base consulted during the international search (name of data base and, where practicable, search terms used) PROQUEST, IEEE, ACM, WEST		
C. DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT		
Category*	Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages	Relevant to claim No.
X --- Y	HAPGOOD, F. What Makes Virtual Vineyards Rule? INC June 15, 1996, p 1-6.	1, 7, 9, 11, 14-18 ----- 2-4, 5, 6, 8, 10, 12, 13
X --- Y	Virtual Vineyards' Corporate Gift Program Offers Unique Ways to Reward Client Loyalty and Help Acquire New Customers via the Internet, PR Newswire, May 4, 1998, p 1-2.	1, 7, 9, 11, 14-18 ----- 2-6, 8, 10, 12, 13
X --- Y	Corporate Gift Program Uncorked, Direct, V10, n9, July 1998, p.73	1, 7, 9, 11, 14-18 ----- 2-6, 8, 10, 12, 13
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Further documents are listed in the continuation of Box C. <input type="checkbox"/> See patent family annex.		
* Special categories of cited documents.	*T* later document published after the international filing date or priority date and not in conflict with the application but cited to understand the principle or theory underlying the invention	
A document defining the general state of the art which is not considered to be of particular relevance	*X* document of particular relevance, the claimed invention cannot be considered novel or cannot be considered to involve an inventive step when the document is taken alone	
E earlier document published on or after the international filing date	*Y* document of particular relevance, the claimed invention cannot be considered to involve an inventive step when the document is combined with one or more other such documents, such combination being obvious to a person skilled in the art	
L document which may throw doubts on priority claim(s) or which is cited to establish the publication date of another citation or other special reason (as specified)	*G* document member of the same patent family	
O document referring to an oral disclosure, use, exhibition or other means		
P document published prior to the international filing date but later than the priority date claimed		
Date of the actual completion of the international search 30 NOVEMBER 1999	Date of mailing of the international search report 09 DEC 1999	
Name and mailing address of the ISA/US Commissioner of Patents and Trademarks Box PCT Washington, D.C. 20231 Facsimile No. (703) 305-3230	Authorized officer ALLEN MACDONALD  Telephone No. (703) 305-9708	

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No.
PCT/US99/20695

C (Continuation). DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT

Category*	Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages	Relevant to claim No.
Y	KLINGENER, A., NewsNet Smart-mail: Push delivery gets smart, Online, Sep/Oct 1997, p 46-47	2-4
Y	US 5,793,972 A (SHANE) 11 August 1998, col 8, line 27	5,6,12,13
Y, P	US 5,860,068 A (COOK) 12 January 1999, col 12, line 4	8,10